

FIGHT

AN INTERVIEW WITH TORO



PHOTO BY
LIISA SCHOFIELD

I don't believe in role models and I don't believe that one way is the right way, but I do find inspiration in people who live their lives the way they want to. Here is one such person. Zoë Dodd has been involved in punk and hardcore on various levels for most of her life, mostly in her current home of Toronto, Ontario, Canada. Most interviews in MRR are with bands, maybe an author or an artist, which I love, but I think you will understand the value of this. I wanted to interview Zoe about her life as a punk which includes music and also her work as an organizer and frontline Hep C worker, housing rights advocate, and a constant force working to end the war on drugs. Not without it's challenges, Zoe speaks openly and without pretension about her journey to where she is now as a survivor, as a frontline worker, as a feminist, as an anarchist, as a band member, as an organizer, as a complex human, and as someone you can easily reach out to for help. Interview and introduction by Mariam Bastani.

Usually these things start with who are you and what do you do but that's a complicated question.

I'm Zoë Dodd. I have been active in the Toronto hardcore punk scene since I moved here in 1997. Besides that I am involved in organizing around issues like harm reduction, the war on drugs, shelters and housing, HIV, Hepatitis C. I've been involved in anti-poverty, drug user organizing, labor organizing, and anti-police brutality organizing for over a decade. I'm an active member in the Toronto Harm Reduction Workers' Union, AIDS Action Now, Toronto Drug Users Union, the International Network of People Who Use Drugs, the Toronto Harm Reduction Alliance (formerly known as the Safer Crack Use Coalition), and the Ontario Coalition Against Poverty.

What is your primary focus? What is your job?

I work for the Toronto Community Hep C Programs at both South Riverdale and Regent Park Community Health Centers. I help coordinate a program for people living with Hepatitis C who actively use drugs. I'm super interested in healthcare and health and quality of life of people, especially people who use drugs, people who are homeless, people who have been incarcerated. I'm maybe the longest Hep C worker in the province of Ontario.

The community health centers I work in are based primarily in low-income neighborhoods that are going through intensive gentrification. Community health centers are a pretty cool model because they have a myriad of services for people. You don't just go there for primary care. We offer diabetes support, gardening groups, community kitchens, culturally specific programming, tai chi, early parenting classes, a grief and loss program for moms who have lost

TO WIN TORONTO ACTIVIST ZOË DODD

their children, a needle exchange program, early childhood education, physiotherapy, counseling, and healthcare for people without status. We work with marginalized communities, lots of POC, people living in poverty, people who use drugs. I love the model because it is holistic and preventative and supportive.

In Canada we have this fee per service model, which is very expensive, but in the community health center sector we are paid by salaries and hourly so it doesn't eat up a huge amount of our healthcare budget. Within the health center we have an extensive harm reduction program that hires people who use drugs to work and coordinate programs. We have the largest needle exchange in Toronto. We give out millions of needles a year and get them back, almost 100% return rate. And we hand out safer crack use kits and other harm reduction supplies. We have a drug users memorial to remember those we have lost because of the drug war. It's an eight-foot copper flame that we created collectively. That's where I work and I love it.

Would you say that your early experiences in this job influenced you and got you involved in activism beyond work?

I was active with stuff before my job as well. When I moved here there was an anarchist space called Who's Emma and punks were pretty involved in political issues and organizing. The anti-war movement was really big here. It was the second time we invaded Iraq and I would go out to big demonstrations against the conservative government, organizing against the massive cuts to the welfare system and the safer streets act that targeted homeless people. I went to a lot of those but wasn't directly involved in helping organize. I went to huge demonstrations that happened after the WTO in Seattle. And then I got more involved with organizing within my own community as I thought organizing locally was more relevant and maybe more effective than attending the huge global demonstrations,

though I think both are still necessary. My work was also informed by my own lived experiences and the experiences of those around me, including those of my friends. So living with lots of people who use drugs and having lost people who died of overdose, having friends living with HIV.

I got into punk when I lived in Edmonton, Alberta and there was huge anti-racist organizing going on. I was exposed to punks against racism who were also fighting white supremacy. There were a lot of white supremacists and Nazis in Edmonton. There would be these full-on battles at shows. For me, it was a very important time. I see some of that today and I wish that punks were involved more in anti-racist organizing. It was an important role that white people played confronting white supremacy in the scene and not leaving it up to Black and brown people to fight on their own. Anti-racist organizing was really important and still is.

When I moved here, the Anti-Racist Action (ARA) was really active. Toronto was home to the Heritage Front and Ernst Zündel, who was this huge Holocaust denier and a recruiter for the Heritage Front. Lots of Nazi skinheads lived here. When the Roma when first came here they were staying in hotels and the Nazis would go to these hotels and attack Roma people. Punks were involved in the ARA organizing and went out there and scared the Nazis off. Fought them and drove them out. Those battles happened all over the city.

We had this brutal conservative government in the province, known as the Harris years. We had massive cuts to housing, the public sector, homelessness and welfare and disability. Lots of brutal cuts, lots of changes in the province where I lived, lots of attacks on people living on welfare, attacks on people living in poverty and I was impacted by that because I was also living in poverty and was impacted by the cuts. That really fueled my interest in being part of community resistance but I was also dealing

with my own personal issues that didn't make me feel confident about being more actively involved.

As a young kid I would organize against things and think politically about everything. Acid rain, it was terrible. Nuclear war, I'm so scared. I would always talk politics and about injustice. I was making kids in my school, like grade four, all watch the killing fields and I was like, oh my god, we have to send money to Cambodia or organize something. I was like that as a kid.

But my parents had a really awful split up. My mom ended up doing basically a midnight move with us up to the North. So we lived in the Yukon which is next to Alaska. I was already a punk, already had a lot of friends that lived in Edmonton. We went up there and it was really turbulent. A lot of terrible things happened to me over a short period of time that impacted me in super negative ways that took a long time to undo, unravel, and work through to get to a place where I felt confident about who I was and have dreams and goals. I didn't really have those as an eighteen-year-old. I didn't have dreams and goals in my early twenties. I didn't think much was possible. It was really depressing.

You said you were already a punk and that you were already organizing when you were a kid. Was it a function of being a sensitive kid? You are a tough lady.

I was tough but still a very sensitive kid. I was really lucky that my parents worked in theater and film and so they were different and their friends were all different. When I was a little kid I felt different. I was like, I'm a nerd, I read a lot of books and I love music and politics and facts. I'm nine and I already know who Divine is. I was surrounded by lesbians and gays and trans people. All these queer people. I wasn't sheltered from the LGBT community. I was around all these artists and young single people that my parents were friends with and it had a big influence on me. I had this incredible Uncle Patrick

who was a young guy who was really cool and hitchhiked everywhere, who got deported out of the country. Then we moved to this isolated place. The Yukon is a cool and interesting place, but it didn't have the same opportunities you have living in a city. It's 13,000 people in the very far north next to Alaska and it was a really turbulent, difficult time. I was already different. I was getting more established in who I was and was ripped out of being able to be actively involved in that subculture.

I spent my summers in Edmonton and would get to go to stuff and shows. I had this great friend Sam, who unfortunately died a couple years ago, but she was my best friend in junior high and high school. We used to send each other letters every day. We had this comic strip going that she would draw of us. We did drugs together, we dropped acid for the first time together, snuck into bars at fourteen together. We had a lot of first times together, listening to Metallica "One" on acid, eating Mr. Noodles. Our first date was watching the movie *Deadpool* because we were obsessed with *Slash*. It was pretty cute. Those early years were pretty transformative and also up and down but she was my most solid friend.

It's always foggy when you're a kid. There are always tendencies that fade away and come back. You are active in the hardcore punk community and community healthcare issues. Do you think those two things informed each other?

I think being a punk totally informed the way I did things. We had this moment in the late '90s, early '00s and it seems to happen in every scene, where some people were just like, "Oh god, everyone is so PC" and then everyone fought each other and people were very divisive. It sucked. People were bullied, especially if you were political. It was horrible. There were a lot of hurt feelings, but it also made me want to do stuff. There were very few women who were active, only a few of us. The scene became really small. People felt pushed out or moved on. It's not like how it is today. There were very few bands and it made me want to be in a band, do punk movie night and make vegan meals for people, made me want to put on shows and organize events and take up space and involve more people and not be pushed out.

Being a Hep C worker I was working with people (and still do) who had no access to healthcare in a system that was and apparently is supposed to be universally accessible, totally left to die because they're somebody who uses drugs. Despite there being a cure for people living with Hep C and despite the fact that 70% of new infections are related to injection drug use. Full-on discrimination. And there is this energy in me to be like, fuck it, I'm gonna do something about it. About people's access, about the lack of information people receive when they are diagnosed, about the fucking problems in the healthcare system for people living with Hep C. So I started a group, a support group for

people who use drugs living with Hep C. I had never done a group before, I have a high school education with one year of college but I knew how punk worked and knew that you could just do stuff. You could network and organize, make food for people. People love food and I read *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* by Paulo Freire and read about popular education. And I was like OK, I'm gonna root this group in popular education. I was really into being an anarchist and anarchism—I still identify as an anarchist—and wanted to use the principles of mutual aid and my own anarchist beliefs in what I was doing.

Do you find that the DIY approach becomes problematic when you start working within the system?

Well, it's a real challenge, but when I got hired I worked with a pretty radical organization started by homeless people called Street Health. They hire a lot of people with lived experience [and] a lot of the workers were involved in the Ontario Coalition Against Poverty (OCAP). A lot of these people believed that this system that we live and work in is so fucked up, that the issues that cause harm to people are a systems issue. They may not all be anarchists but there were communists and Trotskyites and socialists.

It was really awakening for me. "Oh my god, I can do a job that is actually pretty punk." I could get away with being a radical within a social service organization. One of the first demonstrations I organized was around police cameras being installed in this neighborhood. We successfully won and they were taken down shortly after they went up. I worked (and still work) in what is known as one of poorest neighborhoods in Canada, that's home to the first housing project and the largest men's shelter. We had just released this report around homelessness in the city so we organized against the cameras, highlighting the report and my work was involved in that and supported it. I could go to anti-poverty actions and be a part of them, I could be involved in organizing around drug users' issues and that radicalized me in my job. I took that with me to my next workplace and in that job I started to feel way more confident. I was dealing with personal issues and building this sense of confidence in myself that I had never felt before and I felt I could speak up about things.

That's also where I learned about labor organizing. I helped to organize a union in that workplace at Street Health. Unfortunately, I lost my job there just after the union came in because I got targeted by the employer, but so did twenty other people. I went to work in a better place. They hired me knowing that I'm like this, that I am vocal and I do organizing and that is important to me. They haven't stifled me or tried to stop me. When I am representing my workplace, I represent my workplace and when I'm part of an organization I represent that organization and I try to keep those separate so

no one gets mad at me. "What did you do? You got arrested on work time?" I wouldn't do that.

Seems like a lot of punks want to make the world a better place and they start to get involved in organization or education. Punk informs you in a certain way but some times you have to work with the system. Your workplace already had a radical streak in it. But you have had clashes with larger institutions.

I'm apparently banned from all federal health meetings. I cannot go to any healthcare-related meetings with the federal government. I participated in two AIDS conferences where my amazing friend Alex and I helped organize and targeted the Canadian government, primarily the health minister and vandalized the booths that displayed the government at the conferences. Apparently we are now blacklisted [and can't be] anywhere where the federal health minister is. That's fine. I don't care, but those clashes come up and you have to make a decision: How is this going to impact my job? Is this going to impact the people I work with? Is this going to help?

I don't personally think my job should exist. It has to because of the current systems we are forced to live under. I don't think any social service job should exist. Social services are just a way to control the poor and to control groups of people. They can be immediately helpful but long-term they are not solutions... Homelessness shouldn't exist, jobs like these should not exist, but they exist for a purpose. I have always been of the mind that while I'm in this job, I am working my out of this job. You know? I have to work hard to make that happen. One day that could happen because now there are all these cures for Hep C that are shorter. I helped to establish a program that supported people while they were on this really difficult Hep C treatment for a year. Now there is treatment that is only twelve weeks long and totally tolerable for a specific strain of Hep C. The program I work in is community-based and this model is now modeled across the province. It's looked at internationally as a way to deliver community-based care to people living with Hep C. But illness is profitable and we live in a capitalist, profit-driven society that is profiting very largely off people being sick so people don't have access at this time. It's so expensive. The most expensive drugs ever produced: \$90,000 USD for a course of treatment. 180 million people are living with Hep C. That's a lot of profit to be made.

I want to believe that people I work with will get cured and we won't need such an extensive program one day and I can go do something else... I don't want to perpetuate these systems of oppression and I know that I'm a part of it being in social services. I think people do really good grassroots and community-based work. I know so many amazing people, punks doing some really amazing work, especially in harm reduction, prison abolition, healthcare, anti-eviction and gentrification organizing, organizing against and addressing sexual violence, anti-

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racist organizing, and so on. I see some punks in the same kind of system I work in who I think perpetuate some of the problems with social service work and they need to think about that politically. I'm not gonna call them out, but I think if you aren't part of organizing around these systems that create the need for us as workers, and the need for our workplaces, then you are just...people need to think about it theoretically and critically. People talk about burnout a lot in social services. I don't feel burnt out. I'm not burnt out on people. I love being a frontline worker, I'm good at it and I love it, but I am burnt out on the system. It fucking pisses me off so fucking much but that's why I am part of organizing against the system and believe in this theory of working within, against and beyond. I work within it, I work against it, and I want to work beyond the system. For something better. There are models that I work in that I often think and talk about... "This can be adopted in a worker self-managed organization, this could be used in many different ways that could benefit people so much better if we could dismantle other parts of the system." I think about this constantly while I'm working. "This is good, we can keep this around, but this? This thing? It has to go."

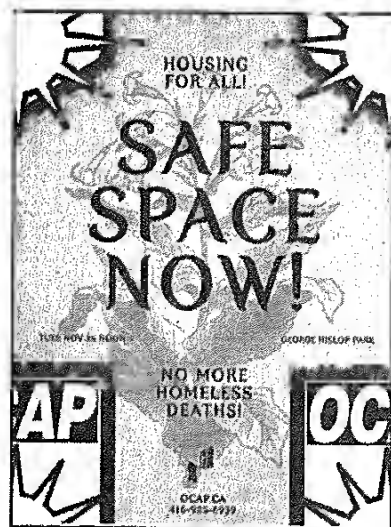
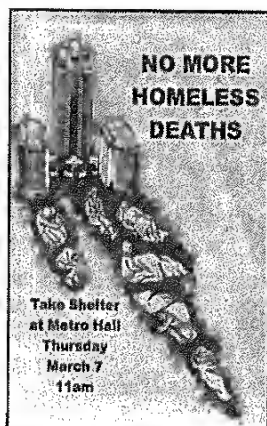
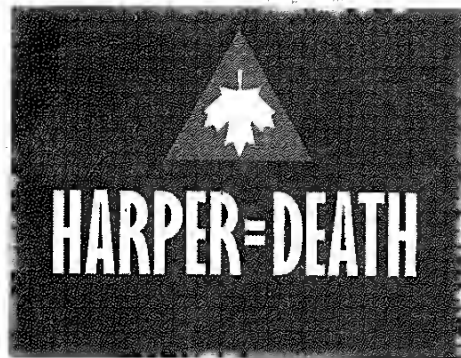
I suppose the problem with bureaucracy in general, is that it's not creating and correcting, it's just adding layers on top of layers.

We just reorganize ourselves within it, we're forced to. We have grown up in North America as generations of people who have known nothing but cuts. In Canada, post World War II and into the early '80s there was the building of social housing and public education, healthcare, the social welfare system and public health sector jobs and all of these things, but all I've known in my generation is cut, cut, cut, cut. There is so much inequality and it's growing. The level of wage disparity is huge.

I don't think people outside of Canada, specifically Toronto, understand what is happening there economically; cost of living, lack of affordable housing and shelters. It's fucking cold and people die.

FORD'S
CUTS
WILL
KILL

AIDS ACTION
NOW!
ACTION = LIFE



Oh god, no...they don't. People die. The average age of mortality of a homeless woman in this city is 39 years old. People die young. I've worked with so many people who have died. I could name them. There is a very, very long list of people who I have known over the years who have died and they died from poverty. They died from the impacts of living in a system that creates this disgusting inequality and creates poor health outcomes that cause people's early deaths. This is a city that has a lot of money and development going on. We have the most development in all of North America. We have condos going up everywhere that are displacing people from their communities. We have the city engaged in these redevelopment exercises that are just taking the neighborhoods where housing projects have been and making them mixed income, pushing people out of those communities who have lived there forever. Socially and culturally cleansing. The city has bought into this lie of working with developers and they are going to develop affordable housing and it's bullshit. Our city sells us out, the Ontario government has these really weak tenant laws, and so we can get evicted so easily. Rent has gone way up, housing prices have gone up way up. They are escalating all the time.

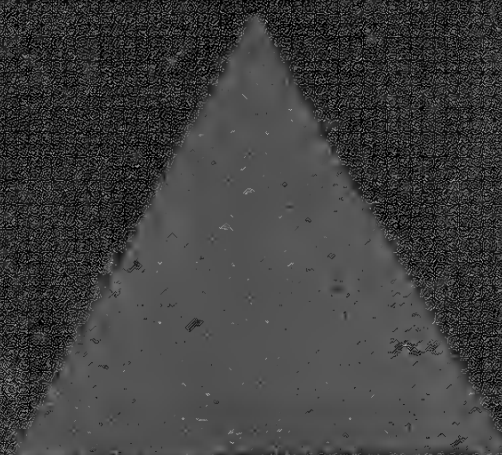
People don't see it, but it's San Francisco, New York, Toronto...

Yes! And it's becoming out of reach for people and they are struggling with many jobs or as best they can to live here. It also means that our shelters are completely full [and leads to] the closing of homeless shelters. Homelessness has massively increased. We have people dying on the streets and there is no political will to change it. We had to fight for drop-in centers and warming centers. That's one of the times I got arrested. The city of Toronto doesn't have warming centers. In the summer we have cooling centers when their apartments are too hot. Yet we have nowhere to go when people are too cold? So this was part of a campaign to have warming centers open. I got arrested twice with fifty-five other people, and we forced the city to open warming centers, but these are like breadcrumbs. We need to keep people alive with these basic fucking minimums that shouldn't have to be fought for. We are fighting for these when we really need to be fighting for housing and we need to put an end to

developers' free rein over our cities. We live here. They need to stop. These are just deposit boxes, condos. Rich people aren't interested in gold bars anymore; they are interested in more and more ways in which they can profit off of our backs. They see apartments and condos as a means to do this. We all need a frickin' roof over our heads so this is a really easy way for them to make money off of us. We are forced to pay rent.

I have been living in an apartment long-term and my neighbors have been living next door for 30 years each and because of the escalating rents, landlords get greedier, they start evicting people because they know they can get more rent. It's happening everywhere. My neighbors and I have been involved in a nine-year battle waged by my landlord because of this. We have been resisting and fighting and winning, together, so we can stay. Now, I have been targeted on my own and have been in a nine-month battle to save my apartment, which has been a social hub for a lot of people in the city and a lot of punks. Lots of bands and punks have stayed here. The place has been designed to host people and put people up. It has been something I have done for fifteen years.

I just officially gave notice on my apartment, after ten years of living here. It takes a toll having to fight every day at my work and then having to fight around my housing. It's really sad. I live in Kensington Market, people fight for businesses here. They don't want any big box stores so they have mobilized against these, but it's also the neighbors and the residents that make where I live what it is, not just the businesses. This is not a neighborhood that I can afford anymore. That is happening to tenants all across the city, pushed out, priced out and moving to neighborhoods they never lived in, maybe feeling isolated. Some of the neighborhoods that have cheaper rent also don't have anything around them, no community centers, and no stores. It can take twenty minutes to walk to a convenience store. It's not good for people, it is isolating. It's sad. It's not just our city; it's Chicago, New York, San Francisco, and London. All the major cities are going through this gentrification at this accelerated pace. These fights are happening but we can't keep up. I just want to drop a banner out my window [laughs] "STOP ALL EVICTIONS!"



HARM REDUCTION = LIFE

That coupled with your work must be taxing.

Last year was really challenging. Actually, it has been tough for a while. I have had a tremendous amount of loss, not just at my work but amongst friends. People have died, from overdose and suicide, cancer. It takes a heavy toll on you and in my own involvement in organizing especially when we, the Downtown East Women's Committee with OCAP were organizing around 24 hour drop-ins for women and trans people. We were in the midst of organizing for these drop-ins in response to a homeless woman who was raped on the corner of Dundas and Sherbourn and then I got sexually assaulted the night before we were supposed to have this demonstration where I was supposed to speak. I was coming home in a taxi and I was like, "What the fuck, is this really happening?" You're organizing and it's so close to home. It feels like when you are organizing around overdose and harm reduction and your friend ODs and dies. It starts to make a personal impact.

People ask what I'm doing for self-care and I don't know what to tell them. I have punk. That's what I've got, that's my biggest outlet. I feel so connected to the punks in the Toronto punk scene and outside of Toronto. I feel so involved in it. It's part of my family, that and the LGBTQ community. Being part of the queer scene and being part of the Toronto punk and hardcore punk community is an amazing outlet when doing this stuff all the time.

It's all encompassing fight. It all affects these populations as well.

It's true. What troubles me is that punks are less involved in those fights. I don't know if that's happening in every city. In organizing I see fewer and fewer punks and it makes me wonder who is making up the punk scene anymore. Don't get me wrong, I love our scene here. I think it's really inspiring to see the young punks coming up. I love their politics. I love their gender politics and I love how diverse our scene is and how welcoming and cool it is for trans and queer people. When I do see a punk at something, an action, though, I get so excited that they are there and they are doing something too. It's not just yelling it in lyrics, it's like, "We actually do have power to do stuff." Because we do have power, people have

power. As cliché as that sounds. Some people are really burdened by the struggle that they live in the day-to-day but there are a lot of people with a lot of privilege who could be organizing and helping in lots of ways in those fights.

What are some good entry points for people to get involved?

I think it's important to organize where you live. Not just these big demonstrations against global capitalism, but also small community-based organizing. I think that's what's really gonna win, in terms of building a stronger unified base. When I was living in Parkdale there were big cuts in the community center and services that I needed to access and then the police budget was going to have a huge hike. I just organized with the people I lived with. We organized a Poor People of Parkdale group, we put up flyers and people came out. We were all people living in poverty organizing together; we weren't part of an organization. I loved it. It didn't last long but I felt it was important. I wanted to learn more about feminism and raise my consciousness around that. I wanted to be part of a feminist group so I helped to start one, meeting in our homes. A feminist reading collective with a bunch of women identified folks, politicizing ourselves. Those are entry points. People can start things themselves and take what they know.

There are a lot of people organizing in Toronto. No One Is Illegal do a lot of fighting around status for people, immigration detention, rights for people without status, rights for immigrants and refugees, don't ask don't tell policies. It's really important work, especially when fifty percent of people in this city are born outside of the country. The laws around immigrating and status have changed a lot. They're more restrictive, more racist. People can be deported easily and we have had the passing of Bill C-51, which will target people of colour and especially Muslim people, target anyone that the government wants to ship out of the country or arrest without ever seeing evidence. Secret trials go on here that have been used to target Muslim men, trials where they never see the evidence against them. They sit in jail without knowing why they are even there. There have been secret trials without their lawyers having any evidence. That kind of stuff goes on.

Those are things people could get involved in organizing against. They can get involved in anti-poverty stuff. There is the Ontario Coalition Against Poverty, there is Jane and Finch Coalition Against Poverty, and there are places that people are doing their own stuff in their own neighborhoods. There is Black Lives Matter organizing, Idle No More, Indigenous Land Defenders that need support, people organizing against the pipelines and continued environmental destruction. People organizing against rape. There is organizing around missing and murdered Aboriginal women. There are over 1200 missing and murdered Aboriginal women in Canada. There is No More Silence. There is sex worker organizing that is going on, fighting laws against sex workers. There are so many fights to get oneself involved in and or support.

Do you think a lot of these organizers band together?

We sometimes organize together. We had this shitty mayor, he was famous because he smoked crack. Aside from that, he was so shady, ignorant, racist. There is a famous picture of him posing with two black men and one of those men is dead. It's like, what was he really involved in? Through all of that there was targeting of communities in a certain neighborhood where people had their doors kicked in and this stuff. It's so messed up what he got away with, but he's a rich white person. White rich man. There were massive cuts coming and we all organized together to stop those cuts. It was his campaign promise. It could have been a lot more brutal but we actually fought back and won against some really massive cuts. There were periods when organizations worked together, signing on to each other's statements, supporting each other in different ways.

Organizations working together is an important struggle because the thing that government fears is people. They fear our power so much so that they invest heavily in police, they invest heavily in prison expansion, they pass horrible laws where they can deport you and end up with no status stuck in a cell. These are the crucial times we need to band together and also let people have control of their own struggle. Showing solidarity is important, not taking up the space, so when you go to a Black Lives Matter demo and you are a white person you are not speaking to the news when the media approaches you. You are supporting and learning and educating and there are ways to do this. People should be constantly learning and checking themselves. Oh, man it's tough, but it's worth it. I am constantly saying to myself, "That was challenging," but I want to be a good person and I want to know. I want to support and understand and fight together but sometimes you have to fight from behind or from a distance cause it isn't your struggle.

I don't think people quite know all of this activity is going on in Canada, good and bad. People just think it's a wonderland of free healthcare. When gay marriage was legalized all over the U.S. it was hilarious to hear people say they wanted to move to Canada to get away from it! *[laughter]*

We've had gay marriage since 2005!

Go ahead and move here!

People don't know anything about the politics of Canada.

We are 35 million people, we just happen to be a very

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large geographical area. We don't have much political influence on the world scale but we have some. I don't blame Americans for not knowing much about Canada *[laughs]* except that we are the neighbors to the north and we do know a lot about America. It means that people have a misconception that Canada is some sort of socialist state. It's not. In our "universal" healthcare, you can get turned away for all sorts of things. It takes a very long time sometimes to get tests or surgeries. It's a system that is broken that needs to be fixed. Healthcare should be public and accessible by everyone.

And then we have this very conservative regime of government that is racist, white supremacist. It hates everyone who lives here who isn't a white conservative. You have to be rich, not poor. Lots of white poor people often support conservative agendas to their own detriment. People would be surprised to learn how undemocratic some of the passing of bills has been. It has been wild. One after another after another. We have mandatory minimum sentencing for drugs. We never had that before. They passed these things called Omnibus bills; which are very hard to fight. We have a Senate that we do not elect, it's appointed, and they pass laws that we all have to live with. Youth unemployment is 20%. We have this on-going genocide of First Nations people here that still isn't being acknowledged. Acknowledgment isn't enough. Acknowledgement is not the solution. Colonization, the '60s scoop, the residential school system, forced assimilation, First Nations people living in really substandard living conditions, intense poverty. This whole country was built on genocide and a land grab and racist policies from the beginning of its colonial settler existence. Canada is a racist country and currently heavily targeting Muslim people. It's all so fucking depressing

You were saying that the climate of punk has shifted as far as involvement in politics goes. Here in Toronto I have noticed more POC, more GLBTQ people. Do you think punks in Canada are experiencing similar changes as in Toronto? Do you think punks are into it or have you seen any resistance?

I haven't seen any resistance and I think I would be so furious if there was. Oh my god, I think I would just lose it. I haven't seen it, I don't know, maybe it happens in smaller cities. Here in Toronto if people are transphobic or homophobic it wouldn't be tolerated. I hope it's not. It's not a PC thing, you just would not be welcome here. We went through this period when it was really tough, older people are really aware that it happened and we want to be sure that it doesn't happen again. So people work on shit together.

Toronto is in a good place. It's really fun. It's not perfect but I feel really lucky getting to be a part of watching these younger people be involved and do stuff. I'd like to think that some of us older people helped pave some of the way as well. It's exciting. It's the same in my job. I see so much potential.

It keeps me excited and driven.

I feel a surge of jealousy when I'm like, "How old are you? You're seventeen and

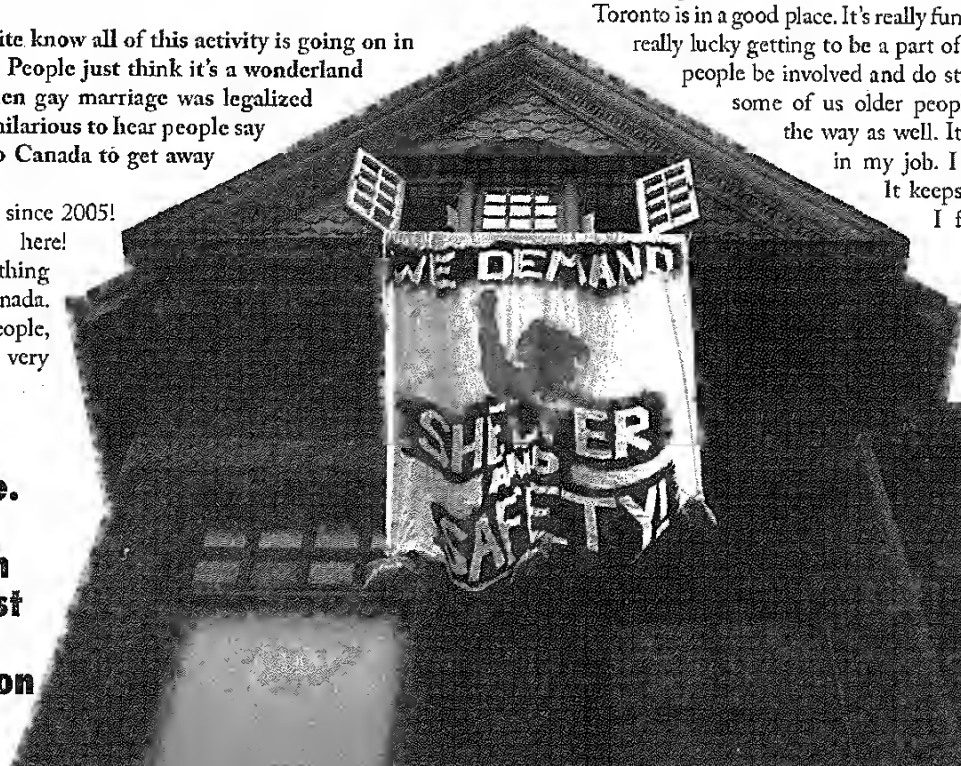


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JOHN BONNAR

you've already been in two really good bands and you're making a film." Deep down I feel a seed of jealousy because when I was seventeen that was not what my life was like at all. I had to work two jobs to pay rent to try to finish high school. I had to leave an abusive situation with my family. It was a struggle. I think I was 26 or 27 when I did my first band. I've been in three bands. I was in a band called Wreak Havoc, which was kind of crusty and funny. My roommates and I started jamming. My friend Jackson and I sang. That didn't last long. Then I was in a band called Concrete Tank, that was a hardcore band again with my old boyfriend and Mateo who I lived with. That was fun. I was also in the Bayonettes, which I liked doing because everyone was doing a crust band or a hardcore band and we were poppier. I was in that band for a few years. It was really fun and a fun time to be in a band. We put out records and went on tour. I never thought I'd ever do that. I always wanted to just sing. I made so many lifelong friends being in that band. Bonds that are so essential and important to me. Being in bands also gave me a lot of confidence to do public speaking, which is something I do a lot of in my work and advocacy.

You recently just got back from a trip for work, right?

Yes! I went to Thailand. I went to a meeting for three days. Last year I went as an expert in helping to develop guidelines around HIV in key populations with the World Health Organization. That was my first time doing something like that. I couldn't believe I was there, but at the same time being a frontline worker, I actually felt I was a good fit and actually had a lot to lend to the experience. I would go to the meeting that was being held in Geneva and then after go drink in the squatted punk bar near where I was staying. Out of that I was asked to be a part of creating a tool with the UN and the International Network of People Who Use Drugs around HIV and drug user organizing and harm reduction. I helped to write a chapter about community empowerment and on viral hepatitis and went to Thailand to be part of the consultation with 50 drug users

who went to talk about and inform the work and other people who do policy, staff with the UN. It was a pretty cool experience. I never thought I would go to an Asian country, I was excited to travel to southeast Asia, very excited to stay in Thailand. I stayed for a holiday for three weeks. My amazing friend Renee who actually convinced me to go to college in the first place and who I am so grateful for met up with me. It was great.

It's been wild. I have a high school diploma and a lot of people that do this kind of stuff have their masters and PhD's. The last couple years I have been published in academic journals around the research I'm involved in at my job. The program I work with is very progressive and is a really great way of treating people living with Hep C, taking it out of specialists' hands and putting into primary care so that everyone can get access so that people aren't turned away. 80% of specialists in Canada didn't want to treat someone with a history of drug use and yet 70% of new infections are related to injection drug use. People want to get rid of Hep C and we want to actually make an effort to eradicate Hep C, so we have to think of these ways that this can actually happen. So, I do sometimes go and talk about my job at international conferences. I like the experience because I really believe in the work I'm doing and that it will translate well as a model in other places. Things are culturally and locally specific so not all things should be cookie cutter or homogeneous, but I do think having primary care and nurses who know how to do Hep C treatment is a good thing. It was really exciting and I hope I get to do more of that kind of work.

I don't want to work for the UN. I want to stay as a frontline worker. The HIV Key Populations was the first time the World Health Organization said we should decriminalize drugs. I'm a huge supporter of legalizing drugs and ending the drug war, which has just wreaked havoc around the world. I think of the on-going war in Mexico, I think about the invasion of Afghanistan and the attack on opium farmers. I think about how much it costs people. It's horrible thinking about the Bali 9 people who were executed. The drug war has been a war on people and I hope it ends in my



I don't have any letters behind my name so I made up I.D.M.J. It means I Do My Job...The system is set up so they don't allow you in without letters... What do need a Masters for to do a referral for a shelter, to speak to people, to do street outreach? You don't need a fucking Masters for that, you just need to be able to know the system and people.

lifetime. I want to be part of ending it. It has been a war especially on people of color and a way for governments to incarcerate people of color. They just destroy people's lives. It's fucking horrible. But then I also want to do something about the drug treatment system, which I fucking hate.

A lot of money being diverted...

Even in treatment and in the US it's billions of dollars of profit for treatment systems that also don't work, that aren't always based in evidence. Operating and taking people's money, thousands of dollars of their money. We could do this better, if we could dismantle capitalism [laughter] because I feel like that's the root cause. People are forced to live in conditions and people cope with the conditions they are forced to live in. Drugs aren't all bad. Using drugs isn't all terrible. 10% of people that use drugs have a dependency or have problematic use of drugs, but it's not everybody. Lots of people take drugs recreationally and never have a problem with them, but some people get issues with drugs. I'm into drug user liberation. There is no real place to have an intelligent dialogue about drug use. Harm reduction is so under attack in all places. In Canada you can't even put it into funding models anymore. The stuff that's out there for people who use drugs is terrible, it's hard to get access to information. There are websites that tell you how to use drugs safely. I'm glad these exist. In the punk scene we have had a lot of people die of overdose, people really struggle with their use. It's really challenging for lots of people to have empathy around it. I know it's hard. One of the first people I fell in love with OD'd and died my first week of moving here. Our relationship was struggling because of the way he used. He

had lots of things going on that I will never know about. There aren't a lot of resources for people out there besides abstinence and twelve-step which doesn't work for everyone.

I strive to not to be judgmental so that people can come to me and talk to me. I've had punks from all over the world talk to me about their substance use or living with Hep C or HIV. People are really secretive about what's going on. We could do a hell of a lot better at not stigmatizing each other. We need to recognize that people don't know what they're using a lot of times, what's in the cut of their drugs. It's heartbreaking when someone young dies from an overdose. Or when anyone dies of overdose. It's so fucking shitty and sudden. There are a lot of overdose prevention programs in the US. The Dope Project is essential to knowing about for overdose prevention. The Harm Reduction Coalition... Everyone should learn overdose prevention.

Sometimes we are stupid in the way we treat drugs. I have been around people where I'm like, "Oh my god, you have taken so much shit." Xanax, coke, Oxys, and all this shit, it's dangerous. We just need to talk with each other a lot more openly. Drugs can be very enjoyable. There is a reason people use them. If they were so terrible then no one would use them, but we do. We need to have honest conversations with each other about how to use things safely. We need to be less discriminatory and there is the hierarchy in use. Someone snorts coke and they find out their friend injects heroin and they are so shitty to the person using heroin. People need to stop that. It makes me angry and sad that people can be so shitty and often those same people drink so fucking much and get so wasted. Somehow that is totally acceptable? The other problem



is that people really struggling have such little resources. I am trying to help a friend get help here and they have to wait two more months before they can have another assessment. It's such a shitty system. I would love one day to be a therapist doing psychedelic therapy with people or trauma therapy with MDMA. MDMA helped me so much with my own trauma that I think it would be great. I'll help you with that, don't drink. [laughter] In my dreams I would have a drug resource center where people can come, get massages, and if they want to kick, I'll help them kick. I've helped friends go through withdrawal before. You wanna have a bath? Want me to rub your feet? You want some decongestant? Just some kinder ways of helping people out. I'm into that. [laughter]

Does the writing you do for these academic journals reflect the radical ideas you have?

Sometimes. I have been running groups for twelve years now. These are groups of people who use drugs and have Hep C and or have HIV living in poverty who have faced discrimination in the healthcare system. I was interested in exploring group cohesion and therapeutic alliance since the group experience has been so transformative for some many people. We did research looking at group cohesion and therapeutic alliance. Along with my coworkers, we wrote a paper on it. It's exciting because I talked about popular education, Paulo Freire, things like mutual aid and it's going to be published in the International Journal of Group Psychotherapy. It's exciting for me to be able to sneak in my ideas and philosophy into that realm and maybe it will inspire somebody to go read Paulo Freire.

My best friend Alex and I got a grant from the Institute for Anarchist Studies to write an anarchist response to HIV and Hep C that we are still working on. I think we should probably just write a book. We are 27 pages in and we are still looking at it, we just need to get it out there. We have plans to put it out and translate it into French and hopefully tour with it to discuss what we think would be a good response.

People have a lot of ideas and we don't put them out enough. We often look to the past, look at people who were great revolutionaries, look at people who wrote incredible books 50 to 100 years ago. There are so many people today that are so inspiring who I am incredibly inspired by all the time. Look at Bree Newsome. Way to climb up that flag pole and tear that fucking flag down. There are so many incredible people in the world, Jennicet Gutiérrez, I was like, right on, fucking heckle him, you know? Show it. Shine a huge spotlight on what is happening in the LGBT community where white middle class people have forgotten about everybody else. That is real. That is so real. It got a lot of attention, it got people talking, and it's exciting. I love reading what other people are writing. All the stuff happening in the U.S., it's so fucked up yet the struggle, the resistance, the rebellion, it's amazing to see the type of local organizing happening, the response to state violence, racism, police brutality...and what people are putting out there. I'm so impressed with people who can shoot off an article and write something. I read so much and every day it burns a fire. I see something changing. All this organizing will feed into something great and maybe it won't happen in our lifetime but it can't stop. We don't have a choice.

You're right, more than ever, we are getting our education from everywhere now and it rules. It's not primarily the academy anymore or just activists of the past. When you started doing this sort of work, were you ever insecure about not having a "formal" education?

Sometimes I feel insecure because I don't love my writing. I think it's a skill that people gain and I also dated someone who insulted me about my writing, it made me feel bad. That didn't help. I felt insecure, but I always knew I was smart. As a young girl it wasn't important to me to be seen as pretty, it was important to me to be seen as smart. When I was growing up that was important, get good grades, read a lot, know about the politics of the world. That was so important to me. I'm confronted with myself a lot. I feel very uncomfortable with myself all the time. I'm challenging myself. I'm having dialogues with myself constantly. If I told people the real way I feel about myself sometimes, my friends would be like, "What the fuck are you talking about?" Because I feel conflicted a lot. I get a kick out of being around people who spent all this time in school and for whom being published is such a huge deal and that's not my motivation. I want to get stuff out there, I want people to know about the program I work in, I

want things to change I want systems to change for people. I don't want people to die of Hep C anymore. I want harm reduction to be the overarching theme. I want things to be evidence based. If I can contribute to that, it's awesome.

I started speaking at Canadian Psychiatric Association. Conferences, I had to put in my credentials to even speak at that conference. I don't have any letters behind my name so I made up I.D.M.J. It means I Do My Job. [laughter] It actually got published in the conference guide. I also use it when I put in submissions with my coworkers for published papers. The system is set up so they don't allow you in without letters. Even in social work now, people want you to have a Masters. What do need a Masters for to do a referral for a shelter, to speak to people, to do street outreach? You don't need a fucking Masters for that, you just need to be able to know the system and people.

There is definitely a tension between academic learning and experience. There is formal education that some get and there are other types of education that other people get. I am self-taught in lots of way and that is important. I got that from punk and life. I didn't have all those things when I was fifteen, I realized I wasn't going to University like everybody else. I wasn't going to be leaving my town and doing that. That's not at all what happened to me. When people were dreaming about what they were going to be when they grew up I just wanted to survive for the moment. Then I spent ten years of my life feeling suicidal and very depressed and just trying to live day to day and deal with all the shit that had happened to me. I was traumatized. It's the stuff we don't all talk about, but I think a lot of punks have been through a lot. There is a lot of trauma.

That's what draws people to punk, whether it's the destructive side, the freedom to be yourself, the creative just do it yourself mentality or being straightedge, whatever it is. Punk was a place I could talk about that stuff. I can find other women that have been raped. Sadly, in the punk scene there is too much of that going on and people have too much social capital and get to stick around instead of getting the boot. That was the place where you opened up, where you talked about body image shit through zines you read or that kind of information you got, women singing about it in their bands. That is so inspiring because we have so many secrets that we keep.

I see such a split in punk with politics. Punks will say they have heard it all before when it comes to something like body image, but then they will say that Hep C is a real problem. There are trends in what is worthwhile and what isn't, and what is, is somehow removed from punk.

People just need to be nicer to each other, they need to be kinder and take care of each other. There is a lot of shit that people have gone through that people don't know about and there are things that really upset people and others need to recognize that we have been impacted

in different ways. I am not tolerant of rapists and sexual assault. I am not going to be that person that is okay with it. I am not okay with it. I was raped when I was a teenager and it fucked me up. It is something I've had to live with. Right after I was raped was the only time I have been pregnant. A month later I had a miscarriage. Six months later I got raped again because I'm all fucked up and some guy drags me across the room, another punk. Do you tell people? I never told anybody. I kept that all to myself because you don't feel supported in your scene. That's fucked up. People in our communities are dealing with that, it's real and it's happening. People need to be kinder and they need to listen and they also need to deal with it. We spend a lot of time on the rapists and sexual assaulters and less time focusing on the people that have been assaulted. That is something we could do better as a community. How we do that, I don't have the answer. I have thought about this a lot as a survivor. It has impacted me in the most negative ways.

It took me until I was 27 to go to school because I fucking hated myself. I fucking hate the patriarchy. I hate capitalism. I want to see it all dismantled. None of this should be happening to us, but it does. It informs everything. It is why I do the work I do, it is why I ended up using drugs in a problematic way, why I had a problem with alcohol, why I have had shitty relationships, why I never wanted kids, why I have PTSD. That can't be ignored. People in our scene are coming with all of that. It's harder for some, not as hard for others. People are impacted in different ways and its really fucking prevalent. As a community/scene we can be better, figure out ways to deal with our shit.

We have been really bad at some things for sure. It took getting a job to go to therapy because I couldn't afford to go see anybody. I would love to fight for those resources and help create some of those resources, so that people don't feel alone and fucked up and silenced. I'm so inspired by people who could come forward and say something because I didn't. This makes me feel really sad. Those who are brave enough to say something and brave enough to confront it inspire me. I'm angry with those who lash out, don't support people and think it's complicated. It's not fucking complicated as far as I'm concerned, people who do shit like that are traitors. We can be shields for people who are doing these things. Is that the society we want to live in? It happens in the activist scene. There are people in the radical scene who have shields that protect them from people calling them out and have done really fucked up things to people. It's really sad that they think they are radical and they are going to change the world.

It's like one good action absolves them of a terrible action.

Yeah! If you are that person this is not meant for you to be organizing in. I want to be able to trust the people I organize with. I want to feel safe and comfortable. I don't want to spend all

of my energy with the shit that derails people's struggles and organizing. I want this apple banished. I want them to go deal with their shit elsewhere. I want us to be able to focus on the real fight, which is dealing with the systems of oppression. Dismantling it and building everything better. Those people are part of those systems of oppression so why am I fucking organizing with them? Why am I hanging out in a punk scene with them, listening to people sing about being traumatized and I'm standing next to someone's sexual assaulter that I know? I wanna just smash their face. I feel very violent towards them *[laughs]* and I won't lie. A lot of people have suffered and they suffer.

The organizing I have gotten involved with is feminist organizing. This woman was raped in the neighborhood I work in, she is a homeless woman. I thought, "We have power. Us, as women." The police had video images and they weren't doing anything about it. We took the men's images and put thousands of posters up of those guys up in the neighborhood to warn other women. We started a campaign for 24-hour drop-ins for women and trans people so people had a safer space to go to in case something happened. We won. We got money out of the city when they said there was none. A couple million dollars annually. That organizing was so important to me.

You are more at risk when you don't have a home, when you are a vulnerable person. You are way more at risk of some really violent shit happening to you. We owe it to each other to fight together and change this shit. I got arrested with five other women when we occupied an office when this city promised us that we were going to have these drop-ins and they did not

care about the lives of these homeless women. We weren't going to stand by and allow that to happen. Fortunately, or unfortunately, the cop that came in to arrest us was really abusive and assaulted myself and Liisa, an organizer from OCAP. It was really violent and scary as they tried to close the blinds so the people outside couldn't see in. That cop was known to OCAP because in the '90s he used to assault sex workers and OCAP had put up thousands of posters of him. That's what I feel like doing to people in the punk scene. I'm gonna put up thousands of posters of your image, so you better watch out. Don't fucking do shit...we should do that shit. There was a guy in this scene that did some fucked up shit to one of our girlfriends and we were like, "We are gonna banish you, you won't be able to go to shows, we are gonna make your life hell when we see you." If people don't like that, I don't fucking care because I don't like what he did to her and I don't like what he did to other women.

Do you see parallels in how punks take on larger issues? That it's easier to face "other" issues rather than look at the ones happening within?

It's really challenging to be betrayed by people you care about. It's hard when someone you know did something fucked up and they are your friend. It's complicated when you know them. It's easier when it's an outsider, a stranger. I think that's what happens, but we aren't doing anyone any good when we aren't dealing with it properly, we are just perpetuating it. Then we aren't keeping it safe for others. I've seen that. I've seen somebody that I did a show for, I didn't know that they had sexually assaulted someone.

If I had known I would have been like, "Fuck you, not doing the show." It wasn't until they got on stage that they started talking about that they had been called out in Winnipeg the night before by the woman he had sexually assaulted with her friends and now he was in Toronto talking about it. I heard years later that he had done it again. Of course he did! What did they do in the meantime? They just reinvented themselves, they are still around and they haven't worked on their shit. That's fucked.

There are accountability processes that people try with predators. I don't think they work so great and honestly people put so much energy into them. It's really challenging and that's where the energy goes while this who have been affected are left to the side. They are maybe given a list of places to go to, but those places are full. After I got sexually assaulted during the organizing for the 24-hour drop-ins, I felt bonkers. I was disassociating, having flashbacks, having to deal with something I did not want to deal with at all. I had taken women's boxing, I had done Wen-Do, I had taken Kung Fu, I had honestly thought, if anything like this ever happened to me again, I would smash their face. I've been in so many fights, I thought I could smash their face in, but I didn't. I shut down like lots of people do. It's just...it's...it's fucking so shitty.

When I was accessing resources there was nothing that I could access. Everything was full. We have one rape crisis center in Toronto, it is volunteer-run and there is no funding for it. When it comes to things for women it's super underfunded. Women and trans people are overlooked. There isn't anything. Therapy costs money and when you try to get into a free program, they are full. During this time I was thinking about how I have to deal with my shit and how I could start a group for survivors where we can talk about the systems of oppression that create this and that this is patriarchy. How can we talk about this in a critical way? It was a great idea, but I needed to do it later when I was better. I had to pay for therapy and was angry about that. I wish I knew the cab driver who assaulted me so I could tell him he had to pay for my therapy for the next six months. I was fucking sober when it happened. I had so much shame on myself.

But...for the first time in my life I was super public about it. I fucking told everybody and told myself that I was gonna talk about it. I just say it, because it makes it easier for me and I'm sick of being quiet about my experience as a survivor. When you do talk about it suddenly everyone around you starts to share their experiences. The floodgates open. People talk about experience that they feel may have been sexual assault. People could really school themselves on what consent is. It doesn't mean that things can't be fun. Things can still be fun, but you need to be cool. *[laughs]* You can't take advantage of people. We need to be healthier with each other. Punks could live by example with each other instead of feeling at odds with

We have so many secrets that we keep.





PHOTO BY
KATE MUNN

each other. We can ask, what is it that we want? What kind of world do we want to emulate? When I think about myself and what I want to be, I am just striving to be a good person. I want to be good to people and try my hardest and best. We can do that. Punks are critical, we are outsiders. Punks have that capability to do that with each other and be better. We can recognize and be critical about what is going on around us. No more fucking bullshit. I don't want to hear about Skrewdriver anymore or your sketchy industrial band that you're ok with. That's enough. Grow up. You have a role to play in dismantling white supremacy, let's get on it. Let's start actually doing some shit and still have fun. It doesn't have to be shitty or PC, or whatever people want to call it but we can't ignore what's happening around the world or to folks we know or are around and are demanding shit of us to not do or do.

Your work is definitely part of how you do this on an individual level. This seems suited for some, but not all.

I didn't know I was going to go into social work/healthcare at all. I was just in a shitty relationship with someone and my friend Renee was here. She was going to go to school and I thought maybe I should go to school too. I didn't even have my own bank account, her and I went to get me my own bank account. When she went to school I said fuck it, I'm gonna go to school. I took this community worker program. I completely fell into everything.

I don't like social workers so much all the time. They can be very patronizing and controlling of the poor and people living in poverty. They are arms of the systems that really fuck people over, whether that's the welfare worker or the probation officer. There are a lot of people that go in with good intentions who end up working in jobs where they don't have control or power to do the good things they wanted to do. I have

welfare workers and children aid workers who are so cool and solid, but they are one in a hundred. People need to think critically about why they are in it. If you are in Vancouver working at the safe injection site are you also involved in supporting drug users in their liberation? Are you also involved in anti-poverty work? Are you involved in anti-gentrification of the downtown eastside? Or is it a cool job?

Some of these jobs are very sexy in this way, harm reduction is the in thing and drug policy is cool, but it's not cool. These are people's lives.

People need to think about the intention. Not everyone needs to be involved in activism. I am a single person without kids, so I have the ability to put my time into other things, but it is important to constantly have a critical analysis about what we are doing. I don't stop. There is always a thing.

I'm involved with the Toronto Harm Reduction Workers Union, which I helped establish. We just formed our own union. I'm a Wobbly, I'm in the IWW, I believe in workers organizing themselves. Everything I believe I try to emulate and be a part of. Those who can do that and have time to do that should try. It would be good. I'm always excited to talk to people about what they are involved in or want to do or want to be involved in. I love to talk to people about how to get involved in things. I know others are like this. When I was on holidays in San Francisco last year I couldn't stop myself. I wanted to know what was happening with the anti-eviction organizing. I went to a couple actions. It was inspiring to see people organizing in their communities and there are ways for people to get involved in that. We are all affected by the systems we live in. Capitalism, the patriarchy. It doesn't matter if you grew up white middle class, you are still impacted. But you also benefit. There are so many ways to be involved. There is so much great writing on the internet right now. You can

READING LIST:

Drug War Capitalism by Dawn Paley, *Resistance Behind Bars Vol. I and II* by Victoria Law, *From Witches to Crack Moms: Women, Drug Law, and Policy* by Susan Boyd (contact Zoe for a full PDF), *The New Jim Crow* by Michelle Alexander, *High Price: A Neuroscientist's Journey of Self-Discovery That Challenges Everything You Know About Drugs and Society* by Carl Hart, *Seeing Like a State* by James C. Scott, *The Globalization of Addiction* by Bruce Alexander, anything by Octavia Butler or Audre Lorde

ORGANIZATIONS:

Vocal New York, All of Us or None, Black Lives Matter, Ontario Coalition Against Poverty, No One Is Illegal, Act Up New York, AIDS Action Now!, Toronto Harm Reduction Workers Union, International Network of People Who Use Drugs

MUSIC:

Flesh World, Total Control, VCR, S.H.I.T., Farang, Equalizing, X Distort Women's Takeover, Kate Bush, Chameleons, Crass, Discharge, the Cure, Radioactivity, Triage, G.L.O.S.S, Mocoso

exponentially raise your political consciousness level in an afternoon.

I'm excited to talk about this. I feel very loved and supported living here. Not just in Toronto, but all over the place. I feel connected to people across the world and they are connected to me. I am in love with all of my friends and I feel well supported by people. That is what community is about. We just have to take good care of each other. I feel taken care of and I take care of people. We support each other in so many ways. I believe in mutual aid. That is revolutionary to me. If I see you at a show and you want to talk about any of this, please feel free to talk to me. If anyone reading this ever wants to talk to someone who is not going to judge them, I'll talk to them and put them in touch with people and resources near them anywhere in the world, especially anything to do with Hep C and HIV and substance use, harm reduction. Email me dangersigns75@gmail.com, facebook me, I am always open. And fight to win.
